



FILLING THE SHADOW WITH SUBSTANCE: A STUDY OF CHRISTY LEFTERI'S *THE BEEKEEPER OF ALEPPO*

Aashiha J Vins¹, Dr. Vigila Jebaruby²

¹ Research scholar, Department of English, Rani Anna Government College for Women, Tirunelveli

² Associate Professor, Department of English, Rani Anna Government College for Women, Tirunelveli.

ABSTRACT

Refugees express their traumatic lives through their powerful writings. In the contemporary scenario, war and violence have become the cause for the emergence of refugees. Religious intolerance, racial prejudices, and cultural hegemony are some of the reasons for the emergence of refugees. Christy Lefteri, being a daughter of refugee parents, records her painful journey across many countries as a hopeless refugee.

KEYWORDS: Brass Project, UNICEF Refugee Centre, Displacement, Mentally Affected, Destitute.

INTRODUCTION

Christi Lefteri is a powerful writer hailing from London. Her parents are Cypriot refugees. She works as a lecturer in Creative Writing at Brunel University. She has listened to the tales of woe as narrated by refugees in the UNICEF Refugee Centre in Athens. These powerful stories have inspired her, and the result of such experience comes out in the shape of a wonderful reaching novel, *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*.

Having experienced the trauma of refugee life, Lefteri's narrative sounds incredible and more wretched. As a refugee, her father has been enveloped in complete darkness and victimized by Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. Following her mother's demise, Lefteri's father returns to Cyprus, a beautiful nation filled with the sounds of nature and fragrance spread out by roses. While voyaging in Syria by a small boat, she encounters severe rules and barriers. With courage, she ventures into Athens, from where she tries to connect with various organisations for help. She reaches the refugee centre for women and children. She is moved to tears on listening to the profound, sad tales of fellow refugees. Inspired by their life stories, Lefteri decides to visit Syria first-hand. But she finds it difficult to accomplish. Through a Syrian refugee, she comprehends the asylum process. He teaches her about life in Syria before the war broke out. She collects information regarding the natural background of Syria. The novelist has met Dr. Aldo Seuss, a refugee who has established the Brass Project. Here, he engages refugees and job seekers in beekeeping. She gets to understand the replace life of bees and their language of communication. While narrating the events, one is emotionally making a journey with the novelist.

Lefteri's characters Nuri and Afra are not fictional, but they are reflections of real refugees who have undergone traumatic lives. During the war, the house of Nuri is thoroughly devastated leaving his whole family in great despair. The explosion of the bomb has blinded his lovely wife Afra and his son was killed. Despite the dark future lying ahead, Nuri can see a ray of hope and light. To regain the spirit of Afra, he often presents

his wife with one or another gift. He infuses her hope with his encouraging words. While getting her a Pomegranate, he implies to her that a healthy life awaits her. Nuri discusses the effects of presenting a gift to the hopeless blind Afra: "It horrifies me that a gift from me can have the power to make her smile now, even if it is so slight as to be almost non-existent. All those times, I wanted to be able to affect her, to bring some light to her eyes," (106).

Nuri, the father who has recently lost his only son Sami in the bomb explosion, is mentally affected. Like many parents who are separated from their children, Nuri longs for his son. Even though he knows that his son has been killed in the bomb explosion, he cannot accept it. Rather, he tries to replace the void left by Sami, another imaginary with Mohammed. He engages in conversation with Mohammed. Whenever Mohammed expresses his anxiety about the rough waves, Nuri tries to evade his fears saying "Pretend we're going on a ship" (120). The boy who represents reality thrusts his real feelings into Nuri, who tries to survive by evading serious issues. In all ways, one can feel that Mohammed is the alter-ego of Nuri. A young man catches Nuriri engaging himself in imaginary dialogue and observes: "'It's just that...' It's just that I lost my son. It's just that... I know. I know what it's like. The void. It's black like the sea" (121).

Despite the hopeless situation the couple has encountered in their voyage towards Athens, Nuri brims with optimism. When Mohammed, his after ego warns him that the boat is going to topple drum, he says "We won't fall in People are praying, Allah will hear" (123). The double consciousness in Nuri speaks up his scepticism through the guise of Mohammed. When Allah has protected their lives, he shoots up a pertinent question, revealing his subconscious thought. "why didn't he protect the other people? Are we special?" (120).

Just as the blind Afra attempts to look at people through her imagination, Nuri mentally hallucinates Mohammed as his son,

who keeps on questioning him continuously in their journey towards Greece. Both of them attempt to fill their absences with some stuff or other. Nuri's mind is littered with many images like 'the burned hives and the dead bees' 'Afra wearing a yellow dress', and 'Afra at the Souq with Sami on her knee and Sami's eyes'. In their voyage, Nuri suddenly feels a surge of waves and consequently, all the voyagers scream out of fear. But in the complete darkness, Nuri cannot see Mohammed. He searches for him under the deep water, but in vain. Then he finds a man holding Mohammed. This fantasy keeps the spirit of her father alive as he tries to fill the gap with a son-figure. He finds comfort in the presence of a son when he is no more alive, he develops a fantasy and tries to overcome his fears by escaping into a fantasy world. This is a unique strategy adopted to overcome his loneliness.

The novelist describes the various traps a refugee has to encounter in his journey. Only his visa and money rescued him. Without a visa and passport, a refugee is held up in an unknown world as an unknown citizen. Often, these refugees give up their hope of survival and they revisit their memories to gain strength. Afra is an artist who develops a strong love for nature, birds and flowers. She paints the natural objects picturesquely. She is struck with the loss of her only son and her eyesight. In this perilous journey, they are uncertain about their destination. In such hopeless circumstances, the refugees rely upon each other and in this process, they find each other again.

Refugee camps are temporary relief centres. They provide short-term shelter till they rehabilitate themselves. However, options for resettlement and long-term integration are limited. Many refugees are confused about their destination and they remain in camps for years. They are tossed by the rough waves in the sea and their dreams and lives are shattered into dust. Most of them cannot sleep peacefully as their lives are at great risk. As Nuri is forced to sleep in a large hall with many men, he cannot sleep beside her. Nuri recollects his sleepless nights: "I knew that there were times in the night when she (Afra) would forget that she wasn't in Aleppo. Her mind would play tricks on her, and she would walk out into the corridor". (94)

The lives of refugees are precarious, as they do not have enough money to spend. Even though they are skilled in any art or business, everyone eyes them with suspicion. Moreover, they do not have any permits to be in a strange country. They are scared of being exposed to the public. Their minds become numbed, and they try to escape into some other world. To forget their memories, they smoke and sing songs. One of the refugees rocks himself throughout the night. Simultaneously, he sings lullabies that he has sung once upon his life for his dead child. Even Mustafa wishes to escape the horrible world and erase the memories of all that he has seen and known in the past. Mustafa is terrified when he finds (fellow beings) the orphaned children and their pitiable condition. Many countries shut their doors and borders against the influx of refugees, fearing that they might bring in some fatal, communicable diseases. Moreover, they may deprive the natives of their job opportunities. Many refugees were caught while they tried to sneak into other countries. They have no means of communication with their

fellow beings. Thus, they are completely isolated and cut off from human contact.

They stay in big tents and they sleep on bunk beds. The trains are overcrowded and they hang off them. They are provided with food of low quality and they have to wait for hours in large queues to get their sardines and bread. Another refugee, Mustafa also shares a similar experience of Nuri. Due to their money and passports, both have escaped to London. Those who do not have these are liable to spend the remaining days in the wretched place where they are trapped. Mustafa expresses his experience of migration. "... I was brought to this barbed-wire camp just outside a village. I cannot get out of here – the camp is locked and there is a queue to leave. The train has no platform. ... I saw people walking across a ladder to get onto it, but at least they are leaving" (97).

Mustafa's wife and daughter are in England awaiting their granted asylum. Only smugglers help these refugees to leave the trap, but the money which they demand is quite large that many cannot afford it. Mustafa advises Nuri to haggle with smugglers. Compared to the communal living of bees, people are not like that. People are too selfish that they do not have a sense of a common cause.

Before deporting the refugees, they are scanned and their fingerprints are collected. They are exposed to harsh weather conditions, scary seashores and lusty criminals. As a beekeeper, Nuri has enjoyed the love of his cousin Mustafa and other friends. He embraces all the destitutes in his fold and never forsakes anyone in danger. He loves his wife Afra and stands by her even at her difficult moments. He always tries to give her hope and receives her spirit by giving her gifts and flowers. She is placed among the natural environment by Nuri, in order to receive her lost spirit. He encourages her hobby of painting and buys her pencils and pad to paint natural scenes. Unfortunately, due to his carelessness, Afra was raped by an unscrupulous man. But Afra does not pain him by mentioning it often. He gives her full freedom to get involved in her activities. He takes her out and describes the lavender and roses in the garden. This therapy instills hope and allows regeneration in her personality.

Mustafa's strategy for dealing with honey bees reaches him the coping strategies in life. He explains "You see, you have to relax and turn into nature. Then you will be fine" (100). When the bees get angry, the beekeeper stands like a gaint statue shielding his eyes with his hands. This gesture protects Nuri from the angry bites of bees, Nuri applies the same method in his way of survival in refugee camp.

Like the honey bees that lead new lives by living in groups, the refugees rely upon each other in sustaining their lives. Nuri always longs for human company especially his cousin Mustafa who has lost his mother in his childhood. Nuri imitates the art of living in groups from the bees. During his refugee life, Nuri has studied the life of bees. If the bees are furious, they will attack the people. In that moment, Nuri would stand still and not make any movements. He would pretend as if he were a tree. By imitating the life of natural objects, Nuri stills his

body without reaching to the adverse situations. He does not even consider other people as enemies. Even Mohammed, his alter ego paints a picture of families out of stone. The novelist narrates about his psyche. "He found stones in the plant pots on the balcony and, using the pen, he drew faces on them. He made a whole family of stones, gliding them across the map as if they were on a journey: father, mother, grandmother, a brother and two sisters" (102). While all refugees intend to escape from the trap, Elias does not want to leave, as he has already travelled too far. As his internal strength allows him, he retains in the refugee camp.

Love for each other and friendship with fellow beings keep the lives of the refugees intact. Afra lives and survives the ordeal in a refugee camp because her husband cares and loves her. A true friend like Mustafa sheds radiance in the dark lives of Afra and Nuri. Above all, both of them want to live despite their heavy losses. Nuri is able to endure the hopeless life of a father who has lost his beloved son by substituting Sami with another figure Mohammed. Thus, the novelist illustrates that hope can rescue a man from any conflicts.

According to the recent survey, about 60 million people are forced to quit their native homes to escape from war, violence, riots and persecution. Displacement happens while they attempt to cross their borders seeking refuge in other safe countries. During the Second World War, there were considerable persecution by Hitler as the Jews were targeted by him. It creates a pathetic situation as half of the refugees are children, some accompanied by their parents. This situation becomes horrible and irrevocable as these children become vulnerable to child labour or sexual abuse.

Only people fleeing from the war zone and violence are addressed as refugees. But there are refugees leaving their native countries due to natural disasters like earthquake. Most refugees have to undergo long perilous journeys with little access for food, water and shelter. In the camp, there is no safety for women. Before securing their asylum, they have to remain in camps for years. At that time, they are not acknowledged as refugees. Moreover, they are subjected to inconsistent and discriminating treatment. Refugees group themselves in the basis of racism and Xenophobia. None offers them jobs and they have to be dependent on humanitarian help. Displacement is a common issue that can be traced out in any race, due to racial prejudice and genocide persecution.

Family disintegration, loss of family members, loss of native land and communal bonding are the adverse effects of forced migration. Though refugee writings are records of intense tragic lives of people deprived of basic amenities of life. Lefteri fills her novel with possibilities of hope and guidance for refugees. She shows how victims can overcome such trauma with close contact with nature and fellow beings. Salman Rushdie, in his context observes

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into

pillars of salt... which gives rise to profound uncertainties- that our physical alienation... means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands. (*Imaginary Homelands* 10).

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